For They Know Not What They Do
Discourse Ethics, Opposing Standpoints, and Reification

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> Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end.
>   (Wittgenstein 1974a, sec. 204)

> *Daughter:* "Can I have some money to buy a crop-top like Ashley's to wear to school?"
> *Parents:* "You can have a new top, but not a crop-top. Crop-tops are too revealing."
> *Daughter:* "But Mom[Dad], you're just wrong. Everyone knows that crop-tops are cute;
>   and I don't want to be a dork."
> *Parents:* "I'm sorry, sweetie, crop-tops *are not* cute, and you *won't* be a dork if you wear
>   your track suit." (Haslanger 2007, 72)

Giving grounds may come to an end, but this end may, as Haslanger's thought experiment illustrates, not be satisfactory. Wittgenstein (1974a, sec. 204) makes a remark that may help to explain why neither side is willing to let itself be convinced by the other: "[B]ut [this] end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game." "… is a dork" functions as a marker in such a language-game, the "dork-game." What "dork" means and who counts as one depends on that game, and while the daughter and her peers play it, the parents do not. Put differently, the daughter and the parents assume opposing *standpoints* in regard to who should count as a dork; that is, they set out from different assumptions from which only certain verdicts can be reached, and from which assumptions they set out depends on whether/how they participate in certain social practices (cf. Hekman 1997; Wylie 2003), viz., follow —usually implicit—rules together with others (cf. Wittgenstein 1958; 1974b; Reckwitz 2003). Thus, a discursive draw seems inevitable (one can easily imagine how the daughter and her parents repeat their arguments another two times each—and then give up in frustration). But they have to evade this draw if they wish to settle whether the daughter may wear a crop-top by means of *discourse ethics* (cf. Mouffe 1993, chap. 9; 2000, chap. 3), which is to say, by discussing so that rational arguments, viz., arguments aiming for truth and supported by reasons accessible to all parties (cf. Habermas 1984, chap. 1), are more likely to be accepted than irrational ones (cf. Habermas 1991).

In my thesis, I want to show that Lukács' (1971) account of reification may help to overcome such draws. Put technically, somebody *reifies* a social practice, Φ, if she/he participates in Φ without being aware of thereby contributing to Φ/Φ's consequences. To come back to our thought experiment, if the daughter feels that the dork-game requires no justification, not even a moral one, then this indicates that she is unaware that she contributes—with her own doing, viz., movements "under her guidance" (Frankfurt 1978, 158)—to the fact that girls who wear track suits count as dorks. To that, the parents can counter: "If you believe that

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you'd turn into a dork just by wearing a track suit, then you reify the dork-game." And if they can show her that she is co-responsible for who counts as a dork, the discussion can proceed, namely, to evaluating the dork-game and her playing along with it on *moral* grounds.

That said, for counters of this type to be forceful, we would have to be (1) *able* to know what we are doing under normal circumstances and (2) *obliged* to do so under relevant circumstances. (1) For us to be able to know what we are doing, we must, in the Lukácsian framework, be able to assess *by ourselves* and *reliably* whether we succeeded in realising our intentions. Yet, Wittgenstein (1958) has drawn this into doubt, for we are unable to notice by ourselves and reliably when we go wrong. (2) That (a) we must be able to become aware of our own doing follows, again, in the Lukácsian framework, therefrom that (b) we can only learn about and realise ourselves if we can assess the merits of what we have done (which, again, we supposedly can only if the intentions we realise are our own). But either our doing serves our intentions or not. If it does, nothing hinders us in learning about and realising ourselves. If it does not, we are unable to assess its merits regardless of how it is organised. How we do what we are doing enters the scene neither way. Thus, demand (a), understood as requirement on how social practices should be organised, follows from assumption (b) only if our participation in a social practice fails to serve our intentions even though it should. When it should do so, however, remains to be shown. (Cf. Habermas 1984, chap. 4 and 8; Demmerling 1994, chap. 3; Chari 2010.)

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Against those objections, I want to defend the following theses:

> (T1) Under *normal* circumstances we *can* know what we are doing, and some of these circumstances are relevant to justifying norms by means of discourse ethics.
> (T2) Under *certain* circumstances we should know what we are doing, or else attempts to justify norms by means of discourse ethics may end in a draw.

These imply:

> (T3) If discourses shall be lead so that rational arguments are more likely to be accepted than irrational ones, we need to take into account not only how we organise our discourses, but also how we organise the social practices that we want to discuss.

To make my case and to spell out the circumstances under which (T1) and (T2) are valid, I will: (1) evaluate competing explanations for why some social practices seem to be independent from us (esp. Berger and Luckmann 1967) and for how different standpoints can be reconciled (esp. Harding 1991; 1993); (2) reconstruct Lukács' concept of reification (following, with respect to methodology, Pedersen 2008) and translate it into terms of modern philosophy of action (e.g., "relations between people" into "social facts"); (3) translate the aforementioned objections against Lukács correspondingly; (4) defend (T1) by drawing on Paul (2009), who argues that we can know that we are φing without having to observe ourselves if we intend to φ and know from experience that we usually succeed in φing when we intend to

φ, and (T2) by extending on Habermas (1991); (5) compare the concept of reification so developed to that of Lukács and empirical studies on our sense of agency (for a survey see David, Newen, and Vogeley 2008). Thereby I aim to develop a concept of reification that is (different to Demmerling 1994; Honneth 2008a; 2008b; cf. Henning 2007; Hartle 2008; Borman 2009) apt to evaluate social practices, (different to Chari 2010) covers practices other than market-related ones, and (different to Stahl 2011) treats the reification of social practices as first and foremost epistemic phenomenon. (6) To conclude, I will apply this concept to the aporia of discourse ethics/deliberative models of democracy (cf. Habermas 1994) sketched out above and discuss what this implies for how we organise social practices.

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